

What were the two
greatest successes
and failures of the
Wilson government
assignment...



What were the two greatest successes and two greatest failures of the Wilson government 1964-70? This period of Labour rule is often marked down as a poor performance on behalf of the labour party, critically looked upon by many historians. There were many failings under the rule of this government however the circumstances they were placed in caused severe restraints in their options.

Wilson had been voted into government with the promise of central planning and “ the white heat of new technology”, catching the mood of the moment, and making the public believe he was not just another old bumbling politician, but one who showed some promise in getting the country moving, and reinvigorating the lumbering economy. However when Wilson was appointed prime minister these issues got pushed back from the centre stage; dumped off into the newly created Department of Economic Affairs.

The majority of research and development funds were being channelled into a few large scale projects which had no real impact on the economy, leaving the new department short on options and in conflict with the treasury over the power to control economic affairs. However the external image the government was giving out was promising, the signing of the National Plan by the government and the trade unions showed potential to the nation, an indication that the new leadership was active in its attempt to bring the suffering economy back to its feet.

However this act in reality did very little to help, and paired with the discovery that the previous conservative establishment had played off the economic situation better than was the reality, it was clear that the labour

party would have to make some big changes to how they were going to operate. In this situation the party really started to become unstuck, changes in the party manifesto were coming thick and fast.

Priorities such as house building, and changes in the welfare state were postponed. Alongside an increased taxation rate and decreased public spending moves, which were unpopular with the general public and caused distrust amongst the citizens of Britain to increase as well as within the party's own ranks. This situation in the British economy led to what was possibly the biggest error of Wilson's government; in the fight against the devaluation of the pound.

It was clear to many economists and members inside the Labour party that the pound was well over-valued, at a rate of \$2.80 at which British trade was completely redundant in the world market, due to extortionate costs for countries wishing to import British goods. At this set rate the changes that Wilson was making to the economy had very little effect. Despite mounting pressure from many fronts, the government refused to devalue the pound until 1967.

There were a range of reasons for this delay, but the majority cause was the worry that the drop in the value would lower Britain's prestige in its world status, and that Wilson was assured that there was a way out without devaluing the pound; a dire misjudgement. As it became clear that the only possible way out of the economic downturn was devaluation, Wilson had left it too late, and suffered personal and professional disclaim, damaging his

reputation and forcing the resignation of Jim Callaghan, a strong supporter of the pound not being devalued.

It was not only the economy which was handled badly by the Wilson government, but also their inability to deal with the trade unions let them gain a tremendous amount of power. Relations with trade unions became strained as the new government continued the Tory policies on freezing pay increases; a move which would not be expected from the everyday man Wilson, who was meant to be in line with the people. The situation was worsened by the implementation of strike action, most surprisingly the seamen strike between May and June 1966.

This show that the party which was meant to stand for the normal people of Britain was being acted out against by the very people who it was meant to be representing. This surprise blow for Wilson began to reveal his inner irrationalities which were mostly hid from public view; behind the scenes Wilson was attributed with almost paranoid belief in plots and threats against him, demonstrated by the claim that the seamen strike action was cause by “ a tightly knit group of politically motivated extremists” although there is very little evidence that such a group existed.

Although disillusioned to the cause of the strike action Wilson still attempted to pull together an act that would limit the pull of the trade unions, and through Barbara Castle’s optimistically titled “ in place of strife” it appeared that they may prevail against the vigilante controlling of the government; through relatively mild controls on their ability to resort to strike action. The

act had popular support in the country as many people did not want to see their country being run by the trade unions.

However inside the labour party the bill met much opposition and even with a majority of 100 it was clear that the bill would not get passed; the majority reason for which being that many labour party members believed, that with the economy in the state it was in, and the failure of the party to meet the measures promised in the manifesto, the working class were the last people they wanted to alienate, if they wished to run for re-election.

In being too weak at the time that the government needed to enforce stern measures they were humiliated by their leader having to slump back to the trade unions to sign a "solemn and binding undertaking" with the Trades Union Congress. After this period it was noted that the government had "lost both trade union support for being too tough and some public support by appearing in the last analysis too weak."

Although often superseded by its failures the Wilson government did have a range of successes. The impact of which may not have matched up to previous administrations, although this may be true they still are believed to have "had a significant impact on social attitudes, and the lives of ordinary individuals". A significant change experienced under the Wilson government is the development of the educational system.

The introduction of the "university of the air", or the open university as it is now known, was a major step in the availability of education, as working adults could now gain a university level education at home; in term

increasing the amounts of skilled workers that can be produced, and the <https://assignbuster.com/what-were-the-two-greatest-sucesses-and-failures-of-the-wilson-government-assignment/>

opportunities open to generations that missed out on the availability of higher education due to the austere era the preceded, where the sons would enter the same line of work as the father.

The introduction of comprehensive schools was also a big move by the secretary of state for education Anthony Crosland, which had mixed reviews from the public. The positive of all children being educated together, the end of the concept of the sink schools where opportunities were limited, were weighed against the benefits of the intelligent getting the better education to provide for the country in the future. The social changes under the Wilson government were also evident as the sixties society allowed the government to make social changes and mark a pivotal point in the change of attitude.

The death penalty was abolished along with theatre censorship, and two years later in 1967 came the legalisation of abortion and homosexual acts between two consenting adults in private, and in 1968 the vote was granted to 18-year-olds. These social changes crossed the border from the previously censored tight lipped society to one of freedom and liberty as we enjoy now, marking an increase in the quality and liberty of life a person could enjoy.

The gap between the upper and lower classes was also reduced, even though a struggling economic climate which increased the difficulty of this achievement; through the distribution of welfare the inequality previously suffered in England was reduced and the social class barrier became less distinct, leading to a much more unified Britain. The Wilson government also handled foreign affairs with relative success.

By this point many countries which had previously been empire building, were criticised for the colonies they held. In the spirit of the sixties and the freedom that was enjoyed by the Western world it was thought that the colonies in Africa and elsewhere were also entitled to their independence, Wilson's government recognised public opinion and gave back territories to their native inhabitants, gaining support through his actions and possible allies, who may also in the long run be relied on for trade.

The decision by Wilson to not commit to the Vietnam War was also a sensible one as although Wilson was under constant barrage from the Americans he saw that the war was not going to be as easy as the Americans believed and once they began to lose numbers he was not willing to risk the lives of much needed British men for a territory which was unnecessary. The Wilson government did achieve many goals, in the face of circumstance.

A small majority and the presence of a harsh economic climate before Wilson got into office, severely hindered the ability of the labour party to make any real impact and, although there was much indecision and many wrong actions taken, the party's achievements in the face of economic strife were impressive. However overall it can be seen that there were more negatives in the Wilson government than positives, exemplified by the election of the Conservative party for the following term.

The lack of action in some areas, such as the trade unions crisis, humiliated Wilson and the labour party, giving them a permanent mark in the public's eye. Much of the overall blame can be laid squarely with Wilson himself as his personality and disbelief in the system, alongside his evident distrust

bordering on paranoia destroyed much of his credibility, not just among his colleagues but among the country in general, the disbelief in his character overall may have made some actions unsuccessful, and internal doubt about the aims of the party, leading to failure as a government.